TIGER

BY WITTER BYNNER

AN ODE TO HARVARD
AND OTHER POEMS

TIGER

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NEW YORK
MITCHELL KENNERLEY
1913

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TIGER

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'Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Framed thy fearful symmetry?'

Tiger

Time: To-night.

Scene: A room in a house not far east of Times Square. A curtained door at the back of the stage leads into the hallway. A closed door at the right leads into an inner bedroom. The furniture and pictures are more showy than expensive. The shades are drawn.

At the rise of the curtain, the keeper of the house sits in an easy-chair. She is a woman of thirty-five, handsome, well-dressed. Her familiars call her Tiger, on account of her hard, lithe brilliance. She is looking over a handful of bills and writing cheques with a fountain-pen on the arm of the chair. On a couch reclines Annabel, a girl of twenty-four, beginning to fade under her paint, but an effective type still, with her hair parted and drawn simply over her forehead to a flat coil behind.

She is in a loose, thin dressing-gown, reading a novel, eating chocolates and smoking cigarettes. An ash-tray, cigarettes, chewing-gum and the chocolates are on a chair beside the couch. At a table across the room, a man of thirty, with somewhat refined features, a suggestive pallor and flush, and a habit of biting the skin on his red lips and of rubbing his thumb over his finger-tips, is pouring himself a glass of straight gin. He is over-dressed, over-mannered and wears several bright rings, but might pass with the young for a gentleman. On account of what is known as his 'class,' he has been dubbed The Baron.

ANNABEL.

Put water in it, Baron. Spare your liver.

BARON.

Mind your own liver and shut up, will you? Whenever I want your dope, I'll ask for it.

[*She returns to her reading. He gulps his drink, then loiters toward Tiger. Suddenly he sits on the arm of her chair, catches her close and kisses her hard*]

TIGER.

[*Pushing him away*]
Cut out that stuff, Baron.
[*Picking up her bills from the floor*]
Come across first
With what you promised.

BARON.

Oh, you needn't worry,
Dear Mama Shylock. You're going to have your pound
Of flesh,—I've said that you shall have her here
To-night. She may be waiting for me now—
[*He looks at his wrist-watch*]
Less than a block away, ready to serve
And honor and obey me.—Damn you, Tiger!
I wonder if I love you more or hate you.
Damn you, anyway!

TIGER.

Oh, swear your head off!
Go over it again, make up your mind
One way and then the other!

[*Looking up from her bills*]

Kiss me, kid!

[*He kisses her hungrily. She stands up and throws him away from her*]

Now snarl at me, you cur. I don't know why
I keep you round; except to purr and snarl
Myself,—first kiss your feminine eyes because
They look so lost in the world, then curse your breed,
You most of all, because you're so unlike
The brutes I'm tired of.

[*She crosses to lay bills and cheques in her desk*]

But what's the use
Of bothering? You suit me. And you're good
For the business. Run along and bring her here.

[*She sits at her desk and writes*]

BARON.

Remember now. She's young, and I'm her first

Offence. And I've been careful with her,
Tiger,
Not touched her fingers only once or twice
And used good English and been sympathetic.

TIGER.
Oh, yes, I know all that.

BARON.
[*Taking a cigarette from Annabel's supply*]
She's different tho',
She hasn't got the taste for it beforehand
Most of them have.

TIGER.
[*Looking round as she seals a letter*]
Then she's the very kind
We want, old boy. The other kind is common
And some of our customers amuse themselves,
You know, by being fastidious. Is she a blonde?

BARON.
Brunette.

TIGER.
Worse luck.

BARON.
No, you can fix that up.
Light hair'd go fine with her dark eyes, good change.
She's just the girl for it, solemn and slow
And innocent. Poor kid, I pity her.

TIGER.
You act like you were getting stuck on her;
Perhaps she'll keep you when you're tired of me.

BARON.
You've got me hypnotized. I don't get tired.

TIGER.
[*She approaches him, seductively, mockingly*]
Be true to me, sweetheart!

BARON.

To hell with you!

[*She lays her hand insidiously on his arm. At once he seizes and kisses her. She leads him to the hallway door, and opens it as he kisses her again, then she pushes him out with both hands and, closing the door, turns back to Annabel, who at every amorous passage between Tiger and the Baron has looked up from her book and watched with curious but accustomed interest*]

ANNABEL.

[*Chewing gum*]

Gee, but I wish I had a man like that!

TIGER.

You'd have one, dear, if you were business-like.

ANNABEL.

[*Shaking her head and marking her place in the book with a cigarette*]

I couldn't hold a man. They get so bored
With me. And, after all, there isn't much

To say to one man. I'd be bored myself
To have to think of new things all the time.
Variety, Tiger, is the spice of life,
Not in the spiel but in the spielers. Dear,
Do you like my hair this way? One of the boys
Suggested that it makes me look too old.
I think I'll put it back again.
[*She starts to uncoil it*]

TIGER.

No, no!
Leave it to me! You'll be told quick enough
When you look old. Let it alone.

ANNABEL.

Well, looks
Ain't everything. I'm getting wise to the game.
Say to a gink, 'Your nose is beautiful,'
'Your mouth was made to kiss,' or call his figure
Military.
[*She examines herself critically in a hand-mirror which she takes from under a sofa-cushion*]

TIGER.

There's just one kind of figure
That makes a hit with me. A good full chest!

ANNABEL.

Gee, ain't they handsome when they have green—backs!
[*They laugh*]
I told a guy last night that it takes dough
To make a tart. Dear, that's my own!

TIGER.

And say,
Here's business, Annabel, take it from me!
You've seen the belly on the dollar-sign?—
Well, the man who has the stomach has the figure!

ANNABEL.

I've noticed that.

TIGER.

Sure thing! And while he thinks

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You're waiting for his phoney kisses—pay
Attention to his stomach and his roll!
Make him eat, drink and spend! My dear, the way
To passion's thro' the stomach every time.

ANNABEL.

[*Meditative*]
Champagne, you mean?

TIGER.

Eve got there with an apple.
But the apple has fermented some since then.

ANNABEL.

[*Laughing with Tiger*]
We have a good time, don't we!

TIGER

You do, dear.
You've been here seven months and, Annabel,
You never once in all that time have had
A grouch.

ANNABEL.

You're square with me, Tiger, that's why.

TIGER.

But, on the level, you don't like the life?

ANNABEL.

Better than selling underwear to women
And paying fines on four whole bucks a week!
Talk as you please, the men have more respect
For a girl that's a good looker and can earn
A seat in a restaurant than for a dub
Who stands up all day waiting on their wives.

TIGER.

Besides, you have as good a chance as me
To save up coin enough before you're old
And rent a house and get some girls together—
And after a while to live in a good hotel

And settle down respectable.—Perhaps
A friend or two. But independent.

ANNABEL.

Chance!
Yes, I've got that. But, dear, I haven't got
The brains to make a hit in any line.
I know my limit and I'm satisfied.
I'm better off than I ever was at home,
And that's enough. The future can go hang.
There's more than one way to prepare a corpse.
Ain't I the cheerful guy?

TIGER.

You're lazy, dear,
That's all the matter with you.

ANNABEL.

Who's the new girl?

TIGER.

Oh, I don't know. The Baron falls for me.
So I can trust his taste.

ANNABEL.

Say, does he fall?
He's jealous, now, of me!

TIGER.

Who's on the job
Downstairs?

ANNABEL.

Cassie to-night. I'm tired. She knows
The steps and laughs a lot, loosens 'em up.
She's popular.

TIGER.

And she's the Baron's work,—
He brought her here last winter. Cassie thinks
The Baron the one bet and he, poor kid,
Just keeps her on because I tell him to.
And see how well the combination works?—
The happy family!

ANNABEL.

Business-like's the word!

[*A knock is heard at the hallway door*]

TIGER.

Quick there! Be business-like yourself for once!
Clear off those things!

ANNABEL.

All right.

[*While Annabel puts bottles and glasses under the table so that they are hidden by the table-cover, Tiger picks up the gum, cigarettes and ash-tray from the chair and tucks them all under a sofa-cushion. The knock is repeated*]

ANNABEL.

My fancy-work,
Where is it?

TIGER.

[*Taking a piece of embroidery from under a cushion*]

Here.

[*She hands it to Annabel and crosses to the easy-chair*]

ANNABEL.

[*Sitting on the couch, with the embroidery, as tho' she had been sewing*]

Now we're a boarding-house!

TIGER.

Throw me the book!

[*Annabel throws Tiger the novel from the couch, Tiger holds it as though she had been reading*]

Come in!

[*The Baron enters, leading by the hand Margaret, a simple, romantic girl of sixteen. She is in street-clothes. She looks toward the two women bashfully, innocently, as they rise and come toward her*]

BARON.

It's Margaret.
This is Miss Dillingham, my aunt, and here's
My Cousin Ann.

MARGARET.

How do you do? Gene's told
Me lots about you. I suppose you think
I'm foolish running away like this?

TIGER.

Why, no!
You loved each other, Margaret.

MARGARET.

My aunt
Was angry when he wanted to call. You see,
She's not like you, Miss Dillingham; she's set
And so old-fashioned. And she thought because
Gene works in a store he isn't good enough.
She said I never should have talked with him
At all. And then she didn't like his voice
On the telephone. . . . I do, don't I, Eugene!

BARON.

[*His arm round her*]
I guess you do, darling.

MARGARET.

You see, my aunt
Has been with us for years and father takes

Her word as law. I knew what she would say
About Eugene and how she'd make it sound.
At first I thought he'd better go himself
And see my father.

BARON.

But I told you, dear,
He wouldn't fall for me. And I couldn't give
You up, now could I?

MARGARET.

No. And so I thought
And thought—and prayed. And finally I came.

TIGER.

And aren't you tired out? Let Annabel
Show you your room. You ought to rest before
Your marriage, dear.

[*Annabel opens the bedroom door. Margaret, vaguely troubled, does not follow her*]

MARGARET.

We must be married now.

BARON.

To-morrow.

MARGARET.

Oh, I thought to-night.

BARON.

But first
I have to get a license and attend
To things like that. And I can leave you here
With Tige—Miss Dillingham. She'll take good care
Of you.

MARGARET.

[*Doubtfully*]
I'll do, Gene, as you say.

ANNABEL.

Your room
Is ready for you.

MARGARET.

[*Crossing to the Baron*]

Oh, if only I
Had seen my father! He might not have felt
As Aunt Louisa felt. It seems so mean
Of me to run away from him. But I left
A little message on his dressing-case
Saying that he would hear from me to-morrow.

TIGER.

You didn't write him anything about
Eugene?—or where you——

MARGARET.

We thought best to wait,
Not to say anything till we could go
To him together, married, hand in hand,
And make him like us both.

TIGER.

When will he find
The note?

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MARGARET.

To-night. Or—let me see,—
what day—?
Why, it's Friday! Then he won't be home
till Monday.
I hadn't thought of that. He always goes
To the country somewhere Sunday with his
friends.
Poor Aunt Louisa will be scared to death
When I'm not back for dinner.

ANNABEL.

But she'll find
The note.

BARON.

Surely, and send your father word.

MARGARET.

She won't know where to reach him.

ANNABEL.

Then I'll go
Outside and 'phone her that you're safe
with me,—
One of your friends. Who shall I say I am?

MARGARET.
Oh no, that would be worse.

TIGER.
That would be lying.
You must be tired, Margaret.

MARGARET.
Yes, I am.
[*With a smile*]
You see, I never ran away before.

ANNABEL.
Didn't you bring——?

MARGARET.
I didn't dare. I just
Went out and walked like some one in a dream
And took the train. My heart was beating so,
I thought that people would look round at me.

TIGER.
And did they?

MARGARET.

No.

TIGER.

That's right! Come,
Annabel,
She's talked enough for now. Lend her
something
To wear to-night.

ANNABEL.

Sure will I.
[*As she goes up toward the hallway door, a knock is heard*]
Who's there?
[*She opens the door slightly and takes from some one a cup of tea*]
Thanks.

TIGER.

[*Crossing and taking the cup from Annabel*]
Oh, yes, we've made some nice, hot tea.
[*Exit Annabel*]

MARGARET.

I don't
Like tea.

TIGER.

Take it this once, it'll do you good.

MARGARET.

[*Tasting it*]
Isn't it very strong?

TIGER.

There's medicine——

MARGARET.

I don't need medicine.

TIGER.

It's very little.
Only to rest your nerves and make you sleep.

MARGARET.

[*To the Baron*]
I'll take it if you ask me.

BARON.

Take it, dear.
That's right. All down!

MARGARET.

It burns.

BARON.

One swallow more!

[*Annabel returns with a night-dress*]

TIGER.

Leave her to Ann and me now till the morning.

BARON.

There. Thank you, sweetheart.

[*He takes the empty cup from her and hands it to Tiger, who lays it down*]

Good-night, Margaret.

[*He holds her hand in both his*]

MARGARET.

Good-night, Eugene.

[*She shyly lifts her face to him. He kisses her*]

BARON.

To-morrow, darling!

MARGARET.

Yes.

[*Margaret goes into the bedroom. Annabel, with a wink to the others, follows her, closing the door. The Baron turns from Margaret and looks at Tiger, who stands facing him with her arms down. She smiles and nods. He crosses to her, puts his arms round her, holds her now with assurance and kisses her. She responds by kissing his eyes.*

The stage now darkens to indicate the lapse of time from Friday night to Sunday night. When it grows light again, a small table is beside the couch, with a chair or two round it, and with cards on it and poker-chips. The Baron sits on the couch idly throwing poker-dice. Annabel, who has been as idly watching him, crosses to the closed door of the bedroom and leans with her ear to the crack of it]

ANNABEL.

[*Moving away again from the door*]
That little girl's more bother than she's worth.

BARON.

[*Still throwing the dice*]
The stuff you gave her in that tea started
The devil in her. Every finger-nail
In action! Tiger bawled me out for quitting.
Poor little girl! I wish she wasn't caught.
Damn it, I was a dog!

ANNABEL.

Well, you lap the hand
That feeds you!

BARON.

[*Putting down the dice*]
Shut up now! I can know myself
And kick myself. But I won't let you do it!

ANNABEL.

Oh, well, who wants to kick a rotten egg?

BARON.

[*He jumps up and, catching her by the wrist, twists it*]

I'll teach you——

ANNABEL.

[*Catching him in the stomach with her knee*]

Will you?

[*Tiger enters from the hallway*]

TIGER.

Stop making love, you two!

[*Crossing and listening at the door*]

How is she, quiet?

ANNABEL.

There hasn't been a squeak To-day.

BARON.

[*Back at his dice*]

My God, she couldn't cry any more!

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[*Tiger turns round at his tone, crosses to him, lifts his chin with her fingers and looks into his eyes*]

TIGER

If you should dare to let her out, you fool!

BARON.

Who's going to let her out? I did the thing.
And I know why. And you know why I did it!

TIGER.

[*Walking away from him*]
I've paid you.

BARON.

[*Amorous*]
Kiss me, Tige!

TIGER.

Let me alone!
[*Turning sharply*]
Good God, you don't think I'm in this for fun!
I'm in it for the future. And there'll be
No Baron in my future.
[*She walks away again*]

BARON.

[*He follows her and, grasping her shoulders, turns her to face him*]

Wait and see!

You'll need me, Tiger, more than I'll need you.

TIGER.

[*Looking at him shrewdly*]

You think so? Annabel, bring me her clothes.

I guess I'll keep an eye on them myself.

[*Exit Annabel into the hall*]

BARON.

There's mighty little you don't keep an eye on.

TIGER.

You nearly took up Cassie for your girl,
And Cassie bores you, Baron. Some one's got
To use their eyes for you. You don't use yours.

BARON.

You're jealous, Tige. Insult me, kid, I love it!

TIGER.

It's business, Baron. Jealousy's a joke.
You know me well enough to quit your bluff
And quit me too, or else to give this girl
The go-by. It's plain business. Do you get me?

ANNABEL.

[*Returning with Margaret's clothes and hat*]
Where shall I put them, Tiger?

TIGER.

Leave them there
For now. And put that over them.
[*She indicates her own cloak. Annabel lays them on the couch*]

BARON.

[*Cowed*]
You're dippy.
I wouldn't do a thing you didn't want.

TIGER.

[*Crossing toward the bedroom*]
What time is it? I guess I'll try again.

BARON.

She hasn't had a bite of food—since when?

ANNABEL.

Not since she came.

BARON.

Lord, Tiger, give her something!

TIGER.

This is my business now. You've done your part.
Get out of here!

BARON.

You bet!

TIGER.

Come back on Tuesday.
These little cooings will be over then.

BARON.

They're over now. I love you, Tige, you devil!

[*He kisses her passionately*]

TIGER.

[*Wearily*]

Good-night.

[*Exit the Baron*]

ANNABEL.

You sure have got him going, Tiger.

TIGER.

I'm sick of him! But I can't throw him down.
The fool might shoot me or else go and blab.
He's the only one I've cared for in ten years;
And I knew, the night I met him, that I ought
To look away and leave him be. It comes
Of letting sentiment into your business.

ANNABEL.

I wonder if I'll ever fall in love.

TIGER.

The only other man I ever loved
Married me, and he used me like a dog.
The time I wasted moping for that boy
Would have set me up by now in Easy Street.
I hung on fourteen months. He didn't hand
Me coin enough for food—there were other girls
More business-like who hadn't married him—
Then cussed me when I couldn't buy his friends
Big eats at home. One of them helped me out
The last two months. He liked me. And I ran
Away with him. I learned a lot from him.
A man's an easy mark unless you love him.
I love that first one yet.

[*Crossing to the bedroom door and signifying Margaret with her head*]

She loves the Baron.

[*Speaking through the door*]

Margaret?—When you choose you can have food.
Just say the word and you'll have it—not before.
You know what good your screams did Saturday!—
And you can cry till doomsday if you want,
Nobody'll hear. Your father'll never come.
And you won't kill yourself. I didn't, dear.
Just say the word, I'll send you in Eugene—
Or some one else—and food!

ANNABEL.

[*Improving her make-up. Pallor and red lips are effective with her black hair*]
She may be dead.

TIGER.

Dead nothing! I can hear her thro' the door.
She'll come to terms. Hunger and time are good
Persuaders. And she knows the Baron's waiting.
He'll teach her first. Then nothing matters. Eight

Or ten hours more at most and she'll begin.
She'll not be too unhappy, *you* know that,—
Probably happier than she would have been
With a cold husband and an empty life
Selected for her by her Aunt Louisa.

[*There's a knock at the hallway door. Annabel goes to it*]

TIGER.

Who is it?

ANNABEL.

Willie's here.

TIGER.

Well, let him in.

ANNABEL.

You think——?

TIGER.

It's safe enough. He's an old friend.
He knows the game and plays it like a good one.
In fact it's sports like Willie have to have
The dainty morsels.

[*She moves Annabel out of the way and opens the door herself*]

Come in. How are things?

[*Enter Willie, a patron, of later middle-age, a stout, prosperous-looking, pleasant gentleman*]

WILLIE.

I'm fine—but hungry, Tiger. Cassie said
She'd send my supper here. I've been out-doors
All day at Ardsley—golf—played well to-day.
And by the way, we asked a girl out there
—A decent girl, you know—to join a four-some;
And what do you suppose she said, not meaning it
At all, referring as she thought to one
Of the sticks? 'I never play,' she said, 'don't know
A thing about it, shouldn't even know
Which end of the caddy to use.'

[*They all laugh*]

Good, isn't it!
Wonderful figure when she tried a stroke,

And a lovely face, no paint, fresh lips,
young, young!
You ought to have that kind of girl. I'm
tired.
Of all your girls! I come here still because
I like you, Tiger.
[*Looking round*]
I'm tired of Annabel.

ANNABEL.

[*With a deep bow*]
Oh, thank you, Willie.

WILLIE.

—Cassie, all of them,
The same old faces. Haven't you something
new?

TIGER.

I'm tired, Willie, of that same old question.
[*A sudden sobbing is heard in the inner
bedroom*]

WILLIE.

Listen!
[*It dies away into a moan*]
What was that, Tiger?

TIGER.

[*Crossing and whispering in his ear with a smile*]

'Something new!'

WILLIE.

What do you mean? A new one? In that room?

TIGER.

Come here now, dearie!—On your honor, sir,
As a friend and gentleman—repeat it, please!

WILLIE.

Well, Tiger, on my honor——

TIGER.

If I put
You wise to a professional master-stroke,
You will not preach nor peach?

WILLIE.

I swear.

TIGER.

Willie,
The 'something new' was brought here——

WILLIE.

Never mind
The story; is she young?

TIGER.

Young as they come,
And new to it,—in fact rebellious, dear,
And fasting for her pains.

WILLIE.

I'll break her in!

TIGER.

The Baron's a much better hand at it.

WILLIE.

Oh, come! It's an adventure!—let me try!
I'll be as gentle as a kitten with her.

TIGER.

No, no,—some other time. There's nothing
in it.

WILLIE.

But, darling, an experience and different!
Girls like me, Tiger. Come on, let me try!
I'll make it worth your while.

TIGER.

Well, you may have
Your supper with her, if you want to pay
Big money.

WILLIE.

Sure. I'm rich to-night. I won
A case last week. And I am going to win
Another case to-night,—you know, a case
Of love at first sight. That's how I feel!

TIGER.

Go in.
And don't believe the fiction that you'll hear.
She's peevish now, that's all. You know
these girls
And their romances and their grievances.
Help her forget them, Willie.
[*She takes a key out of her pocket and puts it in the lock of the bedroom door, then turns before she opens the door*]
Pommery?

WILLIE.

[*Nodding*]
And a tasty little supper for your Willie!

TIGER.

[*Unlocking the door*]

Remember now, you're not to preach——

WILLIE.

Nor peach.

TIGER.

Promise!

WILLIE.

I promise. Wish me good luck, Tiger!

[*She opens the door for him; he enters the bedroom. There is a pause, then, inside the bedroom, a scream of mingled terror and joy from the girl, and a moan from the man*]

MARGARET.

[*Her voice is heard, heartrending*]

Father! Father, I knew you'd come! Father!

WILLIE.

[*Reappearing and facing the women, livid*]

Give me her clothes! Damn you, give me her clothes!

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